

# No more pre-deployment clowning around

## After acknowledging 2003 missteps, Army gets serious about readiness

BY KEVIN DOUGHERTY

Stars and Stripes

GIESSEN, Germany — In the spring of 2003, just before troops from Giessen and Friedberg deployed to Iraq, military and community leaders held a "fair" for families and soldiers that featured experts on various subjects relating to deployment.

Giessen and Friedberg weren't alone. Pre-deployment family readiness conferences were convened in many U.S. Army Europe communities. The gatherings gave families the opportunity to get information on a variety of subjects, ranging from health care to military pay to school bus routes.

Some were low-key events, others less so. In Wiesbaden, for instance, a balloon-twisting clown named Filou rode a unicycle around the venue to liven things up.

Today, with 1st Armored Division units either in or heading to Iraq for a second lengthy tour, pre-deployment readiness gatherings are back on the community calendar, only now things are more refined.

Lessons learned from past deployments coupled with some new Army programs have elevated

ed the effort to keep families connected with soldiers and units.

"Unit commanders don't put family readiness on the back burner anymore," said Jay Burcham, the Army Community Service director for the U.S. Army Garrison Giessen, which includes Hannu, Giessen, Wiesbaden and Baumholder.

"People now understand this is serious business," he said.

At a two-day pre-deployment event last weekend in Butzbach, a bedroom community between Giessen and Friedberg, 1,500 people turned out to meet the experts. They came to tie up loose ends, such as filling out paperwork for power of attorney, and to inquire about other matters of interest.

In March 2003, when a similar gathering was held, community officials called it a "Deployment Fair," said Kathy Monge, the ACS mobilization and deployment specialist for the U.S. Army Garrison Giessen. The word "fair," she said, was left out this time because it implies a degree of levity that, given the situation in Iraq, obviously doesn't fit.

"There is nothing fun about deployment," Monge said. "It's a serious matter."

At the Butzbach event there



Courtesy of the U.S. Army

**Capt. Maria Auer, left, of the 55th Personnel Services Battalion, discusses pre-deployment paperwork with soldiers and family members during Butzbach's Nov. 18 pre-deployment readiness gathering.**

were Department of Defense Dependents Schools officials, finance folks, law experts, personnel, representatives from the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, banking special-

ists and even ADAC, the German emergency auto service. Other organizations were represented, too.

Monge intentionally kept her welcome and introductory speech

short. Two years ago, the briefing lasted upward of an hour, and people noticed.

Misty Adame said she and her husband, Sgt. Paul Adame, attended the 2003 fair. The opening remarks "were long and drawn out," she recalled, and the couple left early, mainly because the place was so crowded.

"This time," she said, the introductory "was very informative. They put out what they needed to put out, and they did it quickly."

The adjustments made in pre-deployment family briefings are, in part, a result of the 2003 experience, Burcham said. Programs then were more "geared toward a six-month deployment," such as to the Balkans.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, Burcham said, "people died, but it wasn't like it is today."

Over time, the Army has learned to use pre-deployment briefings to not only get families squared away on necessary paperwork, but also to inform them of all the initiatives that have sprung up in the past few years. They include programs such as Soldier and Family Life Consultants, Army OneSource, and a Family Readiness Group.

The Army, Burcham said, has become "a lot more responsive and capable [on family readiness issues] than it was two years ago."

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Courtesy of the U.S. Army

**Brenda Swartz, right, and other family members from the 54th Engineer Battalion family fitness program run during the Warner Barracks Turkey Trot on Nov. 18. Swartz is the battalion's family readiness support assistant.**

## When helping spouses is the job description

BY RICK EMERT

Stars and Stripes

BAMBERG, Germany — Nothing can make a deployment to Iraq easy for the families of soldiers who are in harm's way every day.

But an Army position created last year is easing that burden and improving the link between rear detachments and family members.

The family readiness support assistant, or FRSA, is a liaison between the rear detachment commander and the families and Family Readiness Group leaders, according to Brenda Swartz, who has held the position with the 54th Engineer Battalion in Bamberg since March. The battalion deployed to Iraq on Nov. 1.

The assistant does things such as setting up a room where family members can keep in touch with soldiers downrange through e-mail and Web cams, organizing morale trips for family members and providing monthly updates to the Family Readiness Group on what the troops are doing in Iraq.

Although it's not part of the official job description, the assistant also is someone to talk to in the wee hours of the morning when thoughts of the deployment have chased away sleep.

"I think whoever holds this position has to have a compassionate heart, listen and genuinely care about the soldiers and families," said Swartz, who has been a family member in the battalion for seven years, including during the battalion's first yearlong deployment to Iraq.

"There have been days when I'm up until 3 a.m. just talking to a spouse who may have had a bad day or just needs some comfort. To me, that's what this job is."

The position is available only to a unit that is deploying, and although the person who fills it can be hired from outside the battalion, and often is, the 54th has found that hiring from within has been a nice fit, according to Capt. Brian Pugh, 54th rear detachment command-

er.

"By hiring from within the battalion, we have somebody in this job who knows how we do business," Pugh said. "She has been through a previous Iraq deployment and she really knows the spouses."

Swartz performs many of the same duties an FRG leader did during a deployment before the position was created. But the FRG leader is a volunteer spouse who has many other activities and her own family to think about, Pugh said.

"The Family Readiness Group is a tremendous asset," Pugh said. "That hasn't gone away. But now, there is someone here in this office eight hours each day and FRG leaders and family members know right where to come if they need help with something."

Before this job was created, either the FRG was loaded down with responsibilities or the rear detachment tried to handle it all.

That would cut into the other duties of the detachment of about 10 soldiers, such as processing new troops, maintaining equipment left behind and handling soldier issues that the forward unit can't while downrange, Pugh said.

Since being hired, Swartz has planned holiday events, family trips and a fitness program for the spouses, among other things.

"I try to get the ones who have never set foot in the battalion headquarters to come in and see what we have going for them," Swartz said.

"Once they come in, they're hooked. There are so many things that they can be doing to keep their minds off the deployment."

About one month into the deployment, Pugh said Swartz has been vital in keeping things running for the families and FRGs.

"This is one of those really needed and very successful Army programs," Pugh said. "I honestly don't see how we managed things before this position was created."

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Pugh

Swartz